

Notes on Cult Films

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Cult status is tied to the social situation of film reception, and this implies fans. For example, fifty years ago, Marx Brothers films could be considered cult films since screenings brought out dedicated enthusiasts who often knew many of the lines, their favorite scenes and gags, etc. In the 1960s the Orson Welles cinema in Cambridge, Mass., ran a Humphrey Bogart film festival during the exam period every semester at Harvard. Freshmen were initiated into the ritual viewing, and by the time they were juniors could call out their favorite lines, anticipate every plot point, etc.

Peary's book *Cult Movies* arrived in 1981 at the cusp of the change from theatrical to home (VCR) viewing. The films he identified as "cult" were all ones that had to be viewed in the social situation of theatrical film, including repertory houses, midnight screenings, and campus film clubs. One exception: broadcast TV contributed to cult fandom with late night hosted horror films with hosts like Elvira, or by showing sure-fire hits during ratings week such as *Casablanca*—widely known as an audience grabber every time. In pre-videotape days the group experience was essential to the cult experience. The supreme example was *Rocky Horror Picture Show*, which became a weekly repeat experience for a young audience that came in costume, who sang the songs, and acted out in the theatre, etc. Today, different and multiple distribution streams allow for many more films to exist, and private and small group viewing allows for a different sense of "cult" status.

There are still festivals and special occasions for theatrical cult such as theme and event weekends, but the vast expansion of opportunities to view—and importantly re-view—films on tape and DVD have changed the game. Cult films are films which are loved, adored, valued by a self-selecting group of cinéastes. If only one person appreciates a film, we have idiosyncratic fetishism, perhaps rising at most to the level of a "guilty pleasure." True cult status has to have a group, however small, which validates a work as art, or expression, or statement. Of course some films collect dedicated subculture viewers such as the gay male fandom for Judy Garland films. And some films expand into multiple forms including (profitable) serialization, spin-offs, costumes and conventions: *Star Wars* the supreme example.

For the individual viewer, the cult film provides the singular pleasure of adoration. Thus one common definition of cult films addresses this affection, but

the social dimension of cult experience also provides an “insider” status. In general, cult films stand outside the canon of widely accepted works. But, they can become canonical over time. Thus, at one time Hitchcock was generally thought of as a talented technician, but no artist, but auteur critics elevated him to canonical status. The French adored Jerry Lewis who became a French cult figure.

Some cultists want everyone to share their enthusiasm. But some other cultists, particularly of “low” films, revel in their outsider taste and position. They want to validate their cult works, but they also want to keep those films from gaining a wider audience which would dilute their taste culture. Thus, the social function of cult films is to allow what sociologist Pierre Bourdieu called “distinction”—aesthetic discrimination that serves to validate the person making the valuation. Everyone uses aesthetic discrimination. Depending on where one is socially, in terms of both class and education, you can validate high culture art house films (say the cult of Haneke) or low culture trash culture films (say the fans of Troma), and you accumulate some “cultural capital” for your reward.

There's genuine intellectual work in becoming knowledgeable about some small specialized area, and thus cult fans also share characteristics of collectors of all kinds such as a ritualized devotion to something the general culture passes over. The fan publications and websites, and the dedicated retailers and small hip video/DVD stores are necessary parts of the social mix today. It's also key to know that the existence of cults functions to promote connoisseurship. Just as wine lovers spend an inordinate energy on discriminating among wines (and find it fun and gratifying to do so), film cultists can endlessly discuss their beloved objects, be that Italian giallo horror, beach party movies, *Satantango*, grindhouse films, early Jackie Chan, J-Horror, etc.

Of course the cultists take great pleasure in their virtually unique taste, but delight in finding a cadre of others, and truly triumph when they can parade that special status among those who are unwashed and unlearned, but eager to be initiated (the Harvard freshmen). Finding others who share your insider love of *The Big Lebowski*, say, makes you feel good and to share your specialized knowledge with others who understand you, whose existence complements your taste, and are not bored with or tired of your passion. This is even more so when cult knowledge can be used to appall uptight elitists (which works especially well in university humanities departments that are filled with anal retentive aesthetic and/or political conservatives). All of this is present in the *Film Quarterly* symposium back in 2003 validating *Showgirls*.

Recent cult film culture shows a marked tendency to validate the outsider status of the works as somehow transgressive or subversive of oppressive norms, the dominant ideology, or the existing power structure. This claim is often made but seldom examined in depth. And since much (though not all) cult film fandom falls into the demographics of white boy culture, feminists have been justifiably skeptical of its gender politics. An interesting mark of critical change and development in this area is Stephane Dunn's recent book, “*Baad Bitches*” & *Sassy Supermamas: Black Power Action Films*. She works through the racial and gender

politics of Blaxploitation era cult films such as *Sweet Sweetback's Baadasssss Song*, *Coffy*, and *Foxy Brown*. Dunn develops a sophisticated analysis that could serve as a model for many other cult films.

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